Chapter 9

The Public Sphere, Mass Media, Fashion and the Identity of the Individual

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The public sphere is now a well-established notion in eighteenth-century studies,[1] especially when it comes to analyzing periodicals like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* (Newman, 21–4). Most of these studies refer – rather uncritically, as J.A. Downie has recently shown (2005, 58–79) – to Jürgen Habermas's classic political study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which was written 45 years ago. In this chapter, I would like to re-examine Habermas's concept in detail and take a specific look at the role Habermas ascribes to the mass media in the emergence of a public sphere – an aspect largely misconstrued by Habermas, as I will argue. The topic I have chosen to question the workings of the public sphere and mass media directly opposes Habermas's grave, apparently rational, male realm of politics: it is the ephemeral, apparently irrational *mundus muliebris* of fashion. As we will see, such a shift in focus might lead to a different understanding of the public (sphere) than that of Habermas. This new understanding will also make it possible to reconsider the role of the public (sphere) in the construction of individuals' identities. Schematically, my argument will revolve around the following oppositions:

	Old: Habermasian Public	**New: Popular Public**
Typical Topic	Politics	Fashion
Aim	Consensus	Distinction
Mode	Rational-Critical Conversation	Affective Compact Impression
Medium	Interaction	Mass Media
Form	Letter	Advertisement
Place	Coffee-House	'Sphere' of Expectations
Identity	Prerequisite	Consequence

It should have become clear by now that the following discussion will be theoretical in perspective. Historical studies, like any other form of science, cannot

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[1] I am not only indebted to all members of the research network 'Mediating Identities: Medialisierung und Vermittlung von Identitäten im England des 18. Jahrhunderts' for invaluable discussions of earlier incarnations of the thoughts presented here, but also, and especially, to Anna Christina Giovanopoulos and Annette Pankratz for discussing 'Öffentlichkeit' (public sphere).

be conducted without a theoretical framework. Sometimes, we are unaware of the distinctions we draw before we search for material, select and interpret it; some even think that we should just let the sources speak for themselves. Nevertheless, no material can speak for itself: it can only answer to questions we ask. And these questions we ask are dependent on our present preconceptions of bygone societies and their historical development; as every hermeneutic endeavour, historical studies begin with a *Vorurteil* (prejudice). Many studies of the eighteenth-century public sphere have started out from those conceptions outlined by Habermas; as mentioned above, most of these studies found fault in Habermas's description of the eighteenth century and revealed his preconception as a prejudice. However, by exposing Habermas's approach as ideological, it seemed easy to claim a common-sense, bias-free position for oneself. I do not think such a position is possible: the hermeneutic *Vorurteil* can never be overcome entirely; it can only be adequately reflected and adjusted. Rather than claiming to work without all preconceptions, one should, I think, try to explicate one's theoretical framework as precisely as possible. If there really are too many findings that cannot be integrated into Habermas's model, one should look for a new model that might be better suited to give meaning to new historical evidence. It is such a new theoretical framework that I want to propose here. In order to do so, a meticulously detailed examination of Habermas's framework is necessary to find out which theoretical decisions led to the shortcomings of his approach. Following this re-examination, I will try to construct a new framework that avoids Habermas's shortcomings. Of course, this new theoretical framework will only be as good as the extent to which it is able to integrate historical evidence and extricate meaningful answers from these sources. Unfortunately, however, there is not enough space here to put the new framework to the test – that will have to be done elsewhere.[2]

The 'Public Sphere' and Its Media

First published in German in 1962, it took until 1989 for Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* to be published in English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. However, despite it having taken so long for the complete work to appear in English, a summarized version of Habermas's concept had been published 15 years earlier by the *New German Critique* under the title of 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', which was a translation of a 1964 entry to the *Fischer-Lexikon Staat und Politik*.

This quick glance at the publishing history reveals at least two points that are worth highlighting. First of all, Habermas's account of the public sphere is written from a perspective of loss. The liberal bourgeois public sphere that Habermas believes to have emerged in the eighteenth century has long been transformed, or corrupted; the historical image of this public sphere functions mainly as an ideal

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[2] For a more materially saturated engagement with this new framework, see Huck 2010.

for the current state of post-World War II crisis in Habermas's political critique of the present. Habermas, after all, is not a historian but a political theorist. Secondly, as the journey from *Staat und Politik* to *New German Critique* indicates, Habermas's theory of the political public sphere has been turned – not necessarily by Habermas himself, but by editors and adepts – into the foundation for studies of cultural phenomena. Although Habermas refers to central works of cultural publicity such as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* (the 'literary public sphere', as he calls it), these are nothing more than preliminary steps towards his definition of a 'political public sphere'. The simple question that arises from this is whether Habermas's (idealistic) concept of the political public sphere is an adequate tool to analyze the (cultural) effects of *The Tatler*, *The Spectator* and similar papers.[3]

In his encyclopaedia article Habermas states that 'by "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed' (Habermas 1974, 49). According to Habermas, 'public opinion', 'arising from the *consensus* of private *individuals* engaged in public *discussions*' (ibid., 54; my emphasis), is the designation, and the fate, of the public sphere. The function of this public opinion is defined precisely: 'The expression "public opinion" refers to the task of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally [...] practices *vis-à-vis* the ruling structure organized in the form of a state' (ibid.). The public sphere, then, is something that allows or enables those that are not part of the official state to form an (unofficial) opposition, in that 'a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body' (ibid., 49). These 'private individuals' are precisely those 'who were excluded from public authority because they held no office' (ibid., 51), but nonetheless, as 'private individuals' had a legitimate interest in the 'publicly relevant sphere of labor and commodity exchange' (ibid., 52). Does this extend to all individuals? It appears so, since 'access [to the public sphere] is guaranteed to all citizens' (ibid., 49). In this sense, the public opinion of the public sphere is merely an 'informal' equivalent, or supplement, of formal 'periodical elections' (ibid.); the public sphere as a whole is 'a sphere which *mediates* between society and state' (ibid., 50; my emphasis): via public opinion the public body is enabled to supervise public authority (cf. ibid., 49). Here, the public sphere is itself a medium and, as we will see, does not need another medium: it comes into being when private individuals come together.

How is the 'public opinion' formed in the 'public sphere' by the 'public body'? 'Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest' (ibid.). It is of central importance that Habermas's 'public sphere' consists of personal

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[3]   This is not to say that the cultural cannot be political, or that there is no 'political culture'; nonetheless, analytically, both realms work according to different sets of rules, and in order to analyze their interplay and their overlapping it might be best to first note these differences.

gatherings (in coffee-houses, clubs or salons), because it is only here that we can find the civilizing, or rather rationalizing, effects at work, as these are a product of (free) social interaction. Such a 'reasoning public' (ibid., 50) can thus overcome personal (idiosyncratic) opinions and prejudices in free interactional discourse. On the basis of publicly accessible information – a necessary prerequisite – in publicly accessible assemblies, the public body is enabled to control political affairs: 'the process of making proceedings public (*Publizität*) was intended to subject persons or affairs to public reason, and to make political decisions subject to appeal before the court of public opinion' (ibid., 55). Throughout the eighteenth century the 'public' was thought of in interactional terms, in terms of co-presence: the public was a place where individuals came together in person to discuss public matters. And it is important to emphasize that in Habermas's view, 'private individuals' exist as private individuals with private opinions before they come together. Everything else is grounded upon the preceding existence of such individuals and their personal interests in labour and commodity exchange.

There is one element of Habermas's theory that I have neglected so far: the role of (mass) media. In the genealogy of the public sphere that Habermas provides, he elaborates upon the 'important role' (ibid., 53) newspapers play in the formation of public opinion. Taking the developments in Britain as a model example in his more extensive monograph, he highlights precisely those publications that have long been an integral part of English studies, and particularly eighteenth-century studies: 'the *Tatler*, the *Spectator*, and the *Guardian*' (Habermas 1989, 43). However, while the importance of these publications is emphasized historically – and quite rightly so – their place in the systematic account is less prominent. In his encyclopaedic approach, the reference to media is brief: 'In a large public body this kind of communication [at 'free' assemblies] requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere' (Habermas 1974, 49). Similarly, in the longer historical exposition, the emergence of newspaper is cast as a *reaction* to the growth of the public sphere, not as its instigator: 'When Addison and Steele published the first issue of the *Tatler* in 1709, the coffee-houses were already so numerous and the circles of their frequenters already so wide, that contact among these thousandfold circles could only be maintained through a journal' (Habermas 1989, 42).

If there had been big enough coffee-houses, it appears, full of well-informed citizens, newspapers would have been unnecessary for the formation of a public opinion in the public sphere by the public body on the basis of public information. However, simply because of the sheer numbers of 'private individuals' in eighteenth-century London, newspapers became necessary for ensuring that all members of the public were given access to information. For Habermas, the moral weeklies were a platform for negotiations between individuals who were looking for the same 'agreement and enlightenment' (ibid., 43) as it was pursued and practised in the coffee-houses; newspapers were nothing more than an extension

of interaction in co-presence: 'One and the same discussion transported into a different medium was continued in order to re-enter, via reading, the original conversational medium' (ibid., 42).

Mass Media

As I tried to explicate, Habermas's preference for interactional situations grants no more than a supplementary role to the mass media: conversation is 'original', newspapers are a 'continuation'.[4] 'The press', Habermas elaborates, 'remained an institution of the public itself, effective in the manner of a mediator and intensifier of public discussion, no longer a mere organ for the spreading of news but not yet the medium of a consumer culture' (Habermas 1974, 53). In its heyday, according to Habermas, the press worked as a kind of catalyst. Newspaper makers provided the necessary information for private individuals, who would then discuss it in the coffee-houses; these discussions, then, could be reflected in the papers. As a catalyst the newspapers added nothing to the information they secured and remained neutral, without an agenda of their own: they were merely, noiselessly, mediating.

As the antagonist of this neutral function, Habermas identifies 'consumer culture' as such: 'rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode' (Habermas 1989, 161). This mode of consumption, which Habermas identifies as typical of mass culture, apparently 'leaves no lasting trace; it affords a kind of experience which is not cumulative but regressive [sic]' (ibid., 166).[5] The medium can no longer fulfil its function when it is consumed in 'individuated' (albeit 'uniform') form. Information received in this mode, according to Habermas, cannot (re-)enter the interactional, rational discussion of the coffee-house – it is lost in consumption. Habermas even gives a date for when the mediating function of 'the press' was transformed into a commercial one: 'In England, France, and the United States the transformation from a journalism of conviction to one of commerce began in the 1830s at approximately the same time.' From then on, 'private interests' began to rule the mass media. Before, 'the publishers insured [sic] the newspapers a commercial basis, yet without commercializing them as such' (Habermas 1974, 53). What had instigated the emergence of a public sphere – capitalism in the form of 'commodity exchange' – now came to swallow it.

It is not exactly clear what Habermas means by a 'commercial basis' that is not 'commercializing', but presumably he means that commerce was merely a

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[4]   Habermas refers to readers' letters as proof for his thesis, and indeed these played an important role in early stages of the newspaper genre. However, they are an attempt to familiarize a new medium rather than an adequate reflection of the medium's structural status – many wrote letters, but most did not; they merely consumed.

[5]   Cf. Calhoun, 23–4.

means to the editorial end, the material basis for the newspaper to function as a neutral medium. Whether such a situation ever existed is an important question but difficult to answer. According to recent historical studies, politically motivated parties subsidized most periodicals of the early eighteenth century (Downie 1993). The publishers of these newspapers were dependent on financial backing, and their papers were surely engaged in providing not simply the factual basis for rational discussions, but biased rhetorical opinions that eventually led to mud-slinging and a two-party dissensus rather than a consensual public opinion. This can hardly be Habermas's ideal of a free press. Neither, presumably, does he mean those commercially successful publications with pornographic, voyeuristic and spectacular content, which he (deliberately?) ignores in his account of eighteenth-century media. However, the papers Habermas refers to as positive examples – *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, *The Guardian* – seem to have been the only ones that were able to work autonomously, independently of direct subsidies. Here, indeed, 'the *publishers* ensured the newspapers a commercial basis'.

But how were they able to do so? According to Daniel Defoe, the commercial basis of independent newspapers could be ensured neither by sales nor subscription. In an answer to a reader's letter complaining about the increase of advertisements in his paper, he declares: 'The Author lets him know, that first of all 'tis apparent the Principal Support of all the Publick Papers now on Foot, depends upon the Advertisements.'[6] In order to be public, that is, open to all, newspapers needed someone else to pay the bill for the delivery of information: advertisers. Newspapers were and are more than just printed conversation, or fodder for sparking and continuing rational debates. To communicate via printed material produces financial costs that do not occur when talking to those present only – paper and ink have to be bought, machines have to be purchased and maintained and so on. If readers were asked to pay the full price for these costs, the audience would be (even more) severely restricted and the papers no longer 'publick'. As a consequence, communication is no longer a matter between just two parties: alter and ego, author and reader. Nor is it a mere transportation of interactional discussions into another medium. A third factor has now entered the equation with its own motivations: The medium, from now on, adds a message of its own. Communication, from now on, is triangulated, and it becomes impossible to keep an eye on every party involved: front and back, as we will see, start following different agendas.

There is, of course, a lot to be said about the ways in which information is selected for mass media and how it is published, and much can also be said about the categorical difference between spoken and printed discourse that Habermas seems to ignore. For example, newspapers constantly have to produce (spectacular) news items, and therefore they have a tendency to report in quantities and numbers and prefer topics that have pros and cons, or perhaps entail a conflict (cf. Luhmann

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6   *Little Review*, No. 10 (1705), 37. Michael Harris supports Defoe's assessment from a twentieth-century perspective (19–24).

1990, 170–82). Instead of simply revealing what had hitherto been unknown to the public, newspapers, as we know today, create a specific version of reality. However, it is not my topic here to investigate the distorting effects of newspapers competing for attention in an embattled market.

Rather, I am interested in finding out what kind of public (sphere) is created by advertising, especially by fashion advertisements, since fashion is the prototypical topic of (popular) mass-mediated communication and a distinguishing feature of newspapers. More than any other paper, *The Spectator* relied not only on general advertising, but also, and especially, on advertisements for fashionable goods, cosmetics and clothes in particular.[7] In contrast to Habermas's interpretation, the mass consumption of consumer goods is not a consequence of the rise in production caused by the industrial revolution. The lust for consumption and demand for goods did not have to be artificially created after large corporations increased production – consumption, retailing and production have a much more intricate and entangled history. The public sphere is part of this history, and not something that has been consumed by it. As is well known, *The Spectator*, *The Tatler* and other papers excessively reported on questions of fashion,[8] sometimes even more than about literature, art or even politics. In economic terms, clothes were the second largest expenditure in private eighteenth-century households. The fashions (for example *Spectator*, No. 478, 1712) and cosmetics (for example *Tatler*, August 20, 1709) criticized and regulated again and again in the essays on the front page of the broadsheets were regularly promoted on a back page that was often completely filled with advertisements. Advertisements, as I want to argue here, encapsulate perfectly the essence of (popular) newspapers and mass media in general: they speak to you, and to you specifically and especially, but they expect no (direct) answer – they explicitly do not want to start a debate, rational or otherwise. Even more importantly, the popular talks to many 'yous' at the same time. It is personal and common at once.[9]

Advertising and Fashion

As seen above, Habermas situated the political public sphere as a mediator between the interests of 'private individuals' on the one hand and 'the state' on the other. But what oppositional forces are there in cultural matters? Does such a clear-cut opposition exist, as appears to be the case in the political sphere? If there

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[7] For details of the quantity and quality of advertisements for fashion in *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*, see Huck 2007.

[8] For *The Spectator*'s stance towards fashion, as it is to be found in the essays, see Mackie.

[9] My notion of the popular goes beyond eighteenth-century definitions that situate the popular among so-called common or plebeian people only. Rather, what we can witness in the eighteenth century is an emancipation of popular forms from a well-defined demographic section of society: the popular becomes a semantic open to all forms of discourse.

are no elections, what is the 'informal' equivalent that reveals the public opinions concerning fashion? What secret knowledge, hitherto kept secret by interested parties, is to be revealed by the media? Is there a private opinion on fashion that individuals can bring to the public body? Is fashion open to discussion?

In the realm of culture there is no direct counterpart that the public body could challenge with its consensual opinion. Instead, the public provides its own opposition; there are no sumptuary laws passed by the state, for example, which the public opinion could supervise.[10] Taste is something that is discussed among the public itself. Fashion is unofficial, social and inherently public. There are no private fashions and no official ones; a fashion that nobody knows of is not a fashion, nor can fashion be dictated. There are, of course, the institutions Habermas mentions, such as the coffee-houses, literary salons and so on, that facilitate the (rational?) discussion of works of art, books and fashions on the basis of the information provided by the newspapers, and these institutions surely play a role in attempting to create a public opinion about fashion, art, and so on. But are the judgements about 'Culture', resulting from interactional discussions inspired by *The Spectator* and similar papers, really the central effect and function of those discourses?

For Habermas, at least, everything else would signal decline:

> Where works of literature, for example, had previously been appropriated not just through individual reading but through group discussion and the critical discourse of literary publications, the modern media and the modern style of appropriation "removed the ground for a communication about what has been appropriated" [...]. (Calhoun, 23)[11]

This judgement is doubtful in both directions: it is neither sensible to suggest that 'individuated reception' has not been a central mode of reading in the eighteenth century nor reasonable to propose that today's books and films are not eagerly discussed – in fanzines, on fan-sites, in reviews, at parties and so on. However, neither modern-day nor eighteenth-century discussions of works of literature are mere continuations in speech of preceding printed discourses. There are no arguments to be taken up, no single propositions to be extricated. Instead, as I will explain in the following paragraphs, the 'compact impression', as I will call it, of a mass-mediated work forms the basis for further communications.

In any case, it cannot be said that the result of discussions about culture is consensual. More than anything else, fashion is a matter of distinctions, or different judgements and opinions about certain modes of dress. Is there, indeed, any need to produce a consensus about fashion? Who would benefit if there was just one public opinion about fashion and everyone wore the same clothes?

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[10]   Only a few, very specific sumptuary laws, concerning the wearing of highland dress, printed calicoes, or swords, for example, were renewed or even introduced after Jacobean times; general fashions, that is, the cut, colour, and wear of apparel, were not regulated.

[11]   Calhoun quotes Habermas 1989, 163.

Aside from some authors of social utopias, no one has ever argued for a uniform dress for every citizen of a state. There were times, of course, when the state attempted to regulate differences in dress. However, at least since the eighteenth century, 'personal appearance is no longer determined by social consensus' – quite the opposite, as the sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky emphasizes:

> [Fashion] affronts habits and prejudices; it is violently condemned by church leaders; it is judged ridiculous, inappropriate, and hideous by contemporary chroniclers. The latest vogue is viewed as sublime by the elegant set, as scandalous by the moralists, and as ridiculous by the ordinary honest person; fashion and discordant opinion henceforth go hand in hand. (28)

This disagreement is by no means an involuntary or unintentional effect; the moralists try just as hard as the elegant to distinguish themselves through different (opinions on) fashions. Since the field of cultural capital is a contested realm, a consensus concerning matters of fashion can never be attained. Here, 'Culture' becomes culture – the transparent and transitory cement that binds and regulates society, at least momentarily. Fashion, deemed by many as the medium of compliance, is indeed the perfect example of how the sameness of objects and the divergence of opinions go hand in hand. A consensus about what exists does not imply a consensus about how it is – and this how, the way we see and do things, is what defines culture.

According to Niklas Luhmann, who was Habermas's great antagonist in German post-war sociology and is still largely unknown to English-speaking non-sociologists, the function of the mass media is precisely to produce objects that can be taken for granted in (further) communications, irrespective of individuals' perspectives regarding them:

> It seems that interest in [the various] programmes [of the mass media] lies in being presented with a credible reality, but one which does not have to be subject to consensus. Despite living in the same world (there is no other), viewers are not expected to join in any consensus of opinion. They are at liberty to agree or disagree. (Luhmann 2000, 60)

One can talk about this 'credible reality' (defined as consisting of things, but also schemata, scripts, types and so on) without relying on or getting involved with other people's idiosyncratic views.

Without necessarily having to be believed, mass-mediated impressions of reality inform the reader of what others have also been exposed to, providing common ground for future (inter-)action. People do not start discussing whether hoop petticoats actually exist, even if few have ever actually seen one in real life, but they probably all have different opinions on the matter. Mass-mediated impressions of reality can produce a credible reality simply because we expect others to know about them as well: 'Attention is paid to what is emitted just because it has been emitted and may be worthy of consideration; the emission makes it

part of a background reality, frames of normality and a horizon of expectations' (Helmstetter, 54; my translation). This, as Elena Esposito has pointed out, seems especially true when it comes to fashion. Mass media 'provide the individual with fashion styles in the form of general semantic tendencies [...], which the individual can follow or oppose' (Esposito, 168; my translation). Therefore, the possibilities of deviance only come into existence as a flipside of conformity. Mass media present/establish a certain behaviour, or appearance, as is realistically to be expected (to be accepted), yet there is always the possibility that readers use the knowledge specifically to differentiate themselves from such expectations.

This (popular) public sphere, then, is not a place were people come together to engage in rational-critical discourse; this public sphere is a sphere in the more elusive, almost celestial sense. It is the shared 'background reality' (Luhmann 2000, 65), the 'latent everyday culture' (ibid., 66) that remains un-uttered and un-contested, the knowledge that one expects others to expect oneself to have. Such a sphere is open to everyone who can be expected to have access to mass media, regardless of whether they choose to take advantage of it. The idea that what is published in the mass media is out in the open, potentially accessible to everyone, becomes more important than the question of who actually – empirically – accesses it. The 'reality of the mass media' is therefore real because it has real consequences, because it informs people's actions, not because it (mis-)represents a real reality (Luhmann 1997, 1102; cf. Müller 2006, 192).

In this sense, Habermas is perfectly right, willingly or not, in claiming that 'the public held up a mirror to itself' (Habermas 1989, 43) with the help of newspapers. Indeed, the public cannot see reality in this mirror, but an assembly of observers looking for reality – the mirror enables the observation of observers (Luhmann 1990, 181). Therefore, it matters little how real the image of reality they see is; it is enough to know, or even to believe, that others see the same image. And, as Habermas's metaphor of the mirror also reveals, the newspapers are stared at rather than being active agents in critical-rational discourse. The glance into the mirror of the mass media provides the spectator with popular 'compact impressions' (Luhmann 1997, 579; cf. Zorn). In other words, they are presented with condensed, easily accessible, highly charged and alluring impressions of reality that are imagined to be shared with others.

But although the public sphere is potentially open to everyone who has access to mass media, the background reality is not the same for every reader, as it is determined by their choice of reading material, their needs and interests, their economic means and hermeneutic skills, other forms of knowledge and so on. Only the most popular, or fashionable, utterances become part of everyone's reality, and not everything that is made public becomes that popular. As a consequence, the public sphere cannot be analyzed by examining interactional institutions, nor can it simply be analyzed by examining sales figures and the size of readerships. Instead, one has to enter the much more elusive realm of suppositions of suppositions and expectations of expectations, and as these remain unattainable to (historical) analysts, they can only try to determine the popularity of mediated utterance.

What is in fashion, what can be expected to be expected, is not hitherto secret information that simply has to be publicized. It only exists once it is public, and it becomes effective once it is popular. Which forms and topics become popular at a certain time and place is as difficult to determine for the cultural analyst as it is to produce them.

However, to make things popular is precisely the task that Addison ascribed to advertising when he wrote that 'the great Skill in an Advertizer, is chiefly seen in the Style which he makes use of. He is to mention *the universal Esteem, or general Reputation*, of Things that were never heard of' (*The Tatler*, No. 224, 1710). Advertisements especially, and the mass media in general, try to convince the consumer/reader that what s/he knows (and likes), or rather, should know (and like), is known (and liked) by everyone else already (cf. Helmstetter). Advertisements, once again, do not enable the observation of reality (which here would be the inherent qualities of the goods in question), but rather the (imaginary) observation of other observers:

> All Gentlemen may be Furnished with Cloaths, well made and fashionable at 3l.15s. per Suit of Drugget and Saggatee, and Spanish Dragget Suits lined with Durants at 4l.15s per Suit; Livery Suits with Shag Breeches at 4l.10s. per Suit, lace Liveries with Worstead Lace at 6l.10s per Suit; fine Cloath Suits at 7l. per Suit by Tho. Salkild [?] in Earls Court Bow-street, Covent Garden [...].[12]

'Fashionable' is indeed just another word for the fact that something is liked by others, even though one might not have heard about it. It is obvious that such an advertisement does not lead to rational-critical discourse in Habermas's sense, but does it leave no other option but passive-regressive consumption? What is the consumer to make of the compact impressions delivered by the mass media, made popular in the public sphere? Is s/he a mere victim of (hidden) capitalist persuaders?

Individuals

In Habermas's conception, individuals come together as private individuals with individual opinions who then form a consensual public opinion through rational discourse. Following Adorno, Habermas sees the mass media and their homogenizing tendencies ('uniform') as a threat to the individuality of individuals. For Luhmann, on the other hand, the apparent homogeneity of the mass media does not necessarily mean less individuality for the individual. On the contrary, standardization and individuality can be seen as two sides of the same coin, as Elizabeth Eisenstein assumes in her analysis *The Printing Revolution*: 'In this regard one might consider the emergence of a new sense of individualism as a by-product of the new forms of standardization. The more standardized the type,

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[12]   *The Post Man*, No. 1876, 1710; again in June, September and November.

indeed, the more compelling the sense of an idiosyncratic personal self' (56). For Habermas, private individuals are endowed with diverse identities that they are able to, and have to, shed when they enter critical-rational debates, whereas for Luhmann, individuals are undifferentiated entities before they encounter mass media and consequently 'individualize'. Communication that aims at coercing people into forming a consensus can simultaneously signal to the addressee that s/he has the freedom to think differently about a certain topic. Only by realizing that they are asked to consent do individuals become aware of their power to disagree, and what has hitherto just been an idiosyncratic thought now becomes an individual opinion on a shared topic worthy of becoming the foundation of an individual identity. The public sphere, in this sense, does not facilitate consensus; it presents possibilities, a space to negotiate one's relation to a shared (imaginary) culture. Individuals are able to position themselves *vis-à-vis* this culture: 'Nothing defines our world more precisely and through nothing else do we become more individual than by the choice of our newspaper [...] and the way in which we read it' (Baecker, 93; my translation).

However, the individual is at the same time positioned by the compact impressions through which (s)he distinguishes him-/herself. Mass media define those standards from which it becomes possible to deviate, the (limited and legitimated) possibilities from which to choose: 'You can have many opinions, but only within this spectrum and this horizon. And this is obviously invaluable for the behavioural security of humans' (Baecker, Bolz and Hagen, 127; my translation). Fashion enables a peculiarly modern – and it may even be doubtful whether there is any other – version of individuality and individual identity, which is actually a result of the proliferation of the mass media, rather than something needing to be defended against it:

> As a collective constraint, fashion actually left individuals with *relative* autonomy in matters of appearance; it instituted an unprecedented relation between individuals and the rule of society. Fashion's distinguishing feature was its imposition of an overall standard that nevertheless left room for the manifestation of personal taste. One must look like other people, but not exactly; one must follow trends *and* signal one's own taste. (Lipovetsky, 33; my emphasis)

Epilogue: Cultural Communications

Habermas's claim that consumption – of newspapers and informed by newspapers – is a passive, even 'regressive' act, replacing critically engaged conversations, has to be refuted. Surely, one cannot answer mass-mediated communications as one can in an interactional conversation, but there is still room for an active appropriation that Habermas denies and Luhmann ignores. The compact impressions that the mass media leave behind can be answered by another compact impression: consumers choose to wear these clothes and not those, they

adorn themselves in what feels appropriate from the selection on offer. The mass media can, in turn, observe these compact impressions of individuals' positionings towards a shared (imaginary) culture in the form of trends and charts, which can then create new compact impressions that the consumers can appropriate anew. Such communication in the form of compact impressions is, of course, not a rational discourse; instead, it leaves room for affections, aversions and desires. The regulation of such communication works according to feedback loops, producing a sense of normality, and analyzing such exchanges becomes an equally endless task of deciphering highly dense, constantly changing images (pictorial as well as textual, but also various forms of design). However, I would like to state here that such communications via compact impressions are also part of the public sphere, and they should be taken into account when analyzing the culture of eighteenth-century Britain.

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